



U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement

December 15, 2004

# News Release

## **22 CHARGED IN MULTIMILLION DOLLAR MARIJUANA SMUGGLING ENTERPRISE**

SEATTLE - Twenty-two people have now been charged in connection with a multimillion dollar marijuana smuggling and money laundering criminal enterprise. The arrests are part of a year-long investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) into a large-scale international marijuana trafficking organization based in western Washington.

Over the last ten days, investigators seized \$3.4 million, 400 pounds of marijuana, and a dozen firearms. This brings the total seizures to date related to this ring to \$5.2 million in currency and 3,400 pounds of marijuana.

According to charging papers, this marijuana criminal enterprise is spearheaded by Long V. Nguyen, 38, of Tacoma and Nghia H. Pham, 36, of Auburn, who, together, used numerous couriers or runners to transport and distribute multi-pound quantities of marijuana to customers in Washington and beyond. The 22 people arrested worked at various levels throughout the criminal enterprise.

"This investigation resulted in the dismantlement of a drug trafficking supply network in the Pacific Northwest. DEA also attacked the financial infrastructure and seized in excess of \$5 million in cash from this marijuana trafficking organization," said Rodney C. Benson, special agent-in-charge of DEA Seattle. "This law enforcement accomplishment is a direct reflection of the coalition established by DEA with state, local, and federal partners."

During the investigation, agents discovered the marijuana was being brought into the United States from Canada in hidden compartments in commercial tractor-trailer rigs. Money couriers then smuggled the proceeds from the sale of the marijuana back across the border into Canada.

The sales of the multi-pound quantities of marijuana took place at a number of public locations, including stores, hotels, restaurants, and even outside a public library. In one instance agents seized more than \$1.4 million in currency that a co-conspirator was transporting to a storage locker in Kirkland, Washington.

According to the charging documents, the conspirators laundered some of the proceeds from the drug trafficking through the purchase of homes and other assets in the Seattle area. The government is moving to forfeit those assets as part of the 'proceeds of crime' provision of federal law.

"The cross border smuggling of 'BC Bud' generates hundreds of millions of dollars in profits for the criminal organizations involved," said Mike McCool, deputy special agent-in-charge of ICE investigations in Seattle. "One of the keys to dismantling these operations is to follow the money trail because greed is what fuels this dangerous trade. That is what our agents did here, and it's what we'll continue to do until we put these criminal organizations out of business."

Conspiracy to Import and Distribute more than 1,000 Kilograms of Marijuana is punishable by a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison to a maximum of life in prison. Conspiracy to Engage in Money Laundering is punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

DEA and ICE are continuing their investigation. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives (ATF), Pierce County Sheriff's Office, Tacoma Police, Puyallup Police, Bonney Lake Police, Seattle Police Department, King County Sheriff's Office, Renton Police Department, the Eastside Narcotics Task Force, the Washington State Patrol, and Washington State Department of Corrections assisted with the investigation and seizures. The case was designated and specially funded as an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigation.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Ye-Ting Woo and Susan Roe.

# ICE #

*U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.*